

**Northern Plains Resource Council
Testimony on SB 233
March 9, 2011**

Mister Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. My name is Gayle Joslin and I live in Jefferson County. I am a member of the Northern Plains Resource Council, a grassroots conservation and family agriculture organization that organizes Montana citizens to protect our water quality, family farms and ranches, and unique quality of life. I am here today on behalf of our members.

The Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA), passed in 1971, instituted a "look before you leap" policy for Montana. The purpose of MEPA is to foster state government decisions that are informed, accountable, transparent, balanced, and open to public participation. This is a long-term policy for the future of Montana and her citizens.

SB 233 shifts the purpose of MEPA from a process that informs the public and decision makers about the impacts of state agency actions to one to where the legislature decides if environmental laws they enact "fulfill constitutional obligations." What a sham and what a shame. The core principle behind MEPA is to have a fair and open process for projects that impact the lives of Montana citizens. MEPA is about giving the public a voice in the decision-making process on projects that affect their lives. With this bill, the legislature is taking away the public's right to participate in their government's decisions.

Northern Plains is an organization that reflects its members – primarily landowners. To landowners, MEPA is one of the most important protections for their private property. The MEPA process is the place where landowners and communities learn about projects and how they will impact their farm, ranch, or community – for example how tall a proposed power line would be across their wheat field and whether or not they would still be able to drive their combine under it. In this process affected landowners, like our members, are able to weigh in, offer constructive advice, and help the state make better and more durable solutions that work for project sponsors and communities. Our state's farmers, ranchers, and landowners should not be shut out of the process.

These changes will not lead to better decisions. They will not lead to balanced decisions. They will not lead to accountable decisions. This is not transparent government. This bill takes us back to the Copper King days of corporate control of Montana and her citizens – when decisions were made behind closed doors without input from citizens. This bill is a recipe for irreparable harm to Montana's land, water, air, communities, and diverse economies.

Northern Plains believes in the MEPA process. We believe that the State, through its agencies, has a responsibility to protect the environment for the State's citizens. We believe that the state, through its agencies, has an obligation to protect the private property rights of landowners. And, we firmly believe in the right of Montana's citizens to participate in their government's decisions.

Northern Plains Resource Council urges this Committee to vote "No" on SB 233.

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